

Following the Sapphire Path: The Medlock Valley



reimagine
regenerate
rewild

Three decorative blue icons are arranged in a cluster. The top icon is a laurel wreath. The middle icon is a butterfly. The bottom icon is a branch with berries and leaves.



This is the
Medlock Valley.
And we have
a bold vision:



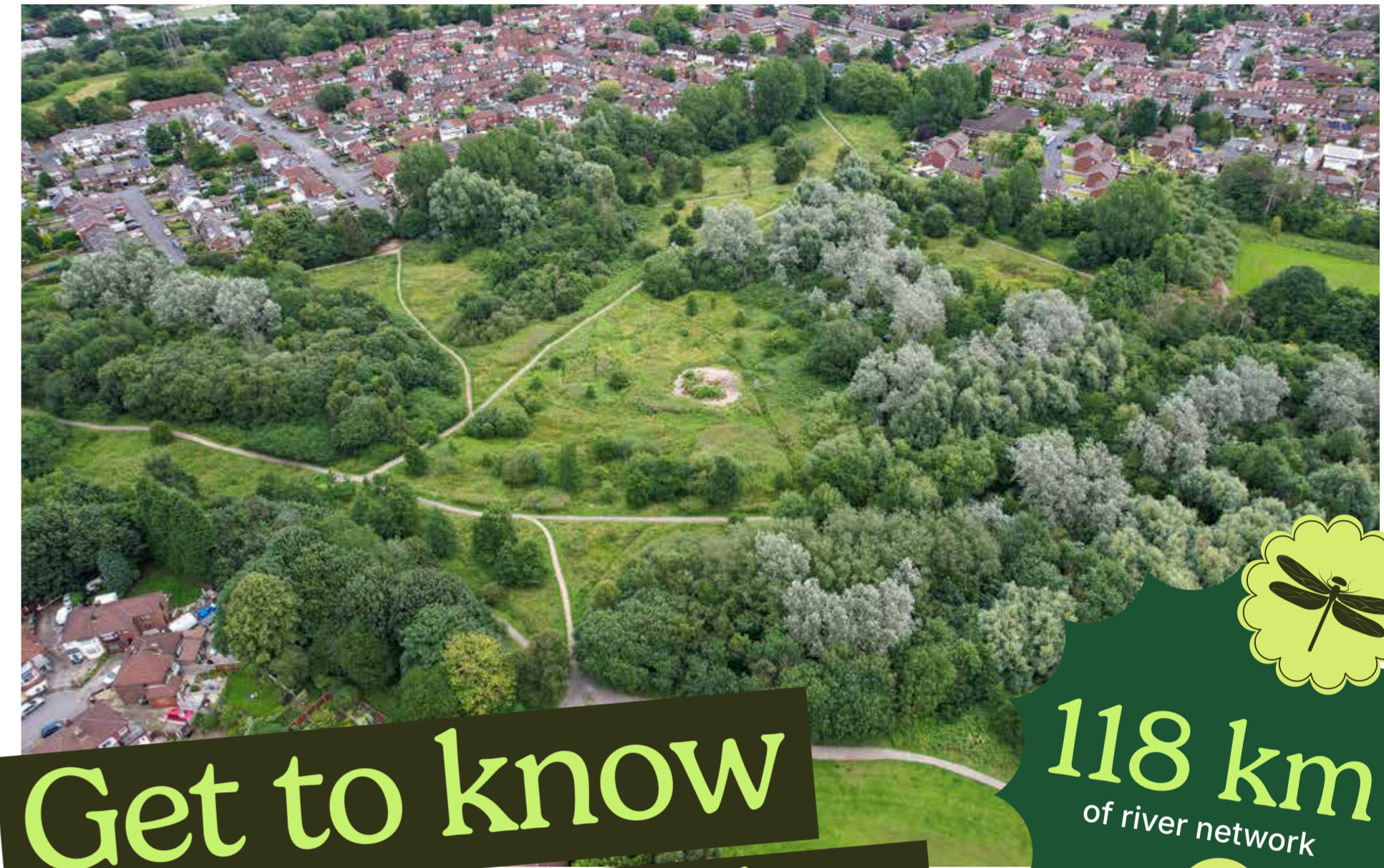
To reimagine, regenerate and
rewild the Medlock Valley –
restoring habitats, reconnecting
communities, and repositioning
the valley as an invaluable
natural asset for Greater Manchester.



vibrant
inspiring
future-facing



Living corridor for nature and people.



Get to know the Medlock...

118 km
of river network

340ha
of priority habitat



From the hills above Oldham, flowing through Tameside, to the heart of Manchester city centre, the River Medlock traces the story of the world's first industrial city. Now, it's experiencing an ecological rebirth.

The River Medlock powered Manchester's industrial revolution, but became heavily polluted as a result. It was also prone to devastating floods, including the 1872 disaster that swept away bridges, damaged homes and businesses and washed bodies from Philips Park Cemetery into the city centre. As a result, the river was contained in a curved brick channel with high stone walls. What was once the centrepiece of Philips Park, which opened in 1846 as one of the first 'People's Parks' in Manchester – the river is now often hidden and inaccessible with little biodiversity and poor water quality. Today, as Manchester regenerates, the Medlock is ready for its own transformation – into a valuable living landscape.

The Medlock Nature Valley Partnership is a landscape-scale collaboration transforming 118km of river network, 17km of canal, an area equivalent to nearly 500 football pitches of priority habitat, and over 322 football pitches of designated wildlife sites – including Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Sites of Biological Importance (SBIs), 6 Local Nature Reserves, and a Country Park – into a connected, living corridor for nature and people.

**This is not a single project.
It is the reimagining of an entire valley.**

Why here? Why now?

One million people live in the Medlock Valley's three local authorities. Many nearby communities rank in the most deprived 10% nationally, with poor access to green space, high health inequalities and limited economic opportunity.

The Medlock flows through exactly where investment is needed most, reaching the people who will benefit most – families, young people (Oldham has the highest proportion of 0-15 year olds in Greater Manchester), ethnically diverse communities, those currently excluded from conservation, volunteering and green skills opportunities. Investment here doesn't just transform a landscape – it addresses inequality at scale.

The Medlock Valley represents one of Greater Manchester's most ambitious opportunities for nature recovery at scale; climate resilience; social justice through access to green space; walking, wheeling and cycling; and a long-term boost to the local economy.

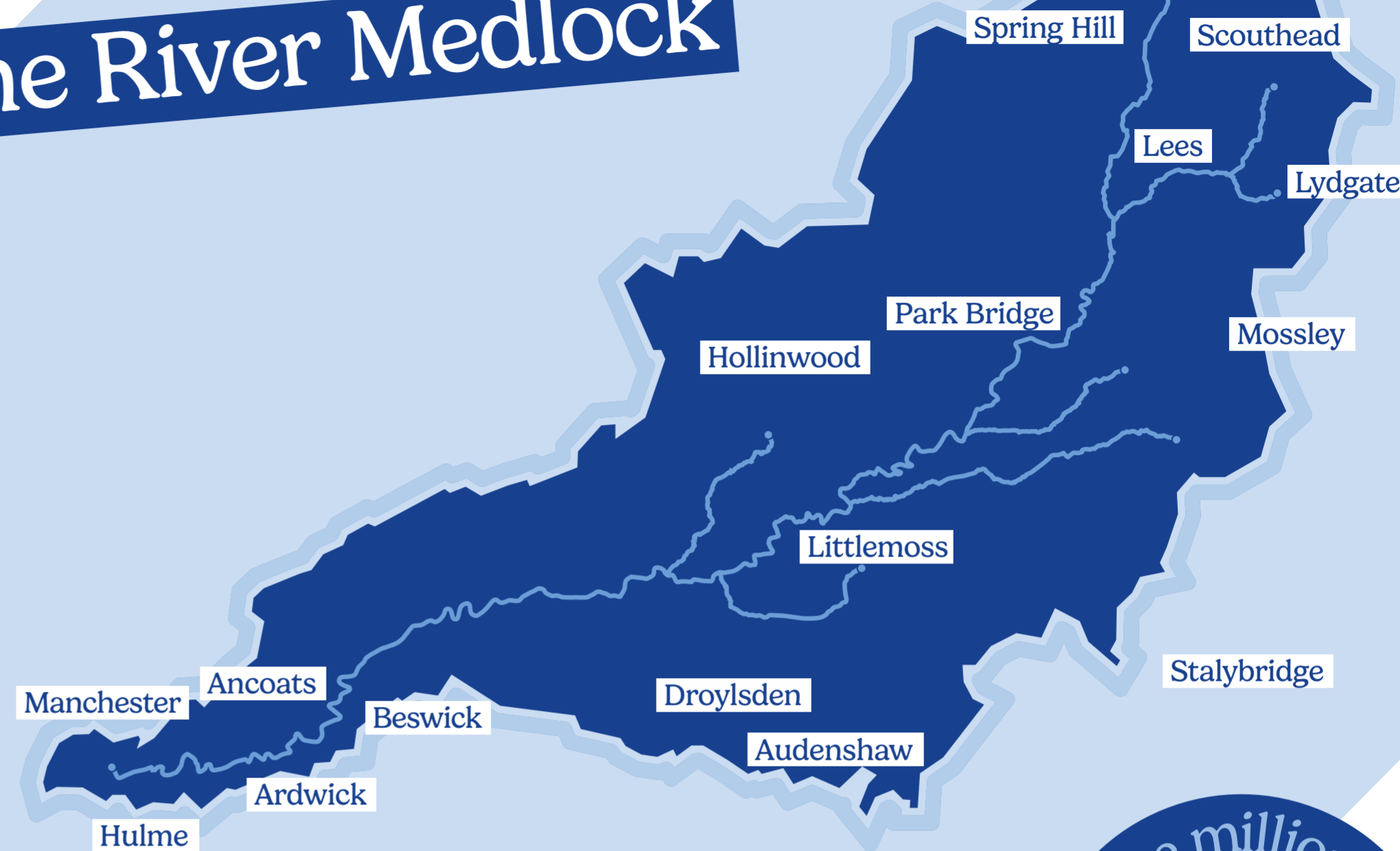


Who's in the partnership?

- Canal & Rivers Trust
- City of Trees
- Environment Agency
- Greater Manchester Combined Authority
- Greater Manchester Ecology Unit
- Groundwork Greater Manchester
- Lancashire Wildlife Trust
- Manchester City Council
- Mersey Rivers Trust
- National Trust
- Natural England
- Northern Roots
- Oldham Council
- Tameside Council
- The Conservation Volunteers (TCV)

The Medlock Valley Partnership blends environmental expertise, regeneration leadership, community action and strategic investment. Together, it is restoring landscapes shaped by industrialisation and unlocking a new identity for East Manchester and beyond.

The River Medlock



The Cyan Lines Connection

CyanLines is Greater Manchester's most significant green infrastructure initiative in a generation. And the Medlock Valley is its natural eastward extension beyond the city centre. Launched in 2025 with backing from major developers, Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), Manchester City Council, the National Trust and Natural England, CyanLines aims to develop over 100 miles of high-quality walking, wheeling and cycling routes connecting the city region's blue and green spaces over the next decade.

The Medlock Valley takes CyanLines from the city centre to the Pennines, through east Manchester, Tameside and Oldham. With wayfinding, storytelling, community ownership, and nature at heart – tools and creative conservation methods pioneered here can be replicated across the entire network.

History & Heritage

The valley at the heart of Manchester's story

The River Medlock and the Ashton and Rochdale Canals tell a shared story of the area's industrial heritage and ongoing renewal. Rising in the hills above Oldham and flowing into the Irwell at Castlefield, the Medlock once powered the mills that defined Manchester as the world's first industrial city. Running alongside it, the Ashton Canal (opened 1796) and the Rochdale Canal (opened 1804) were vital for early industrial transport, moving goods in and out of the city before the arrival of the railways. Following the decline of canal transport, both waterways fell into disrepair, but have since been carefully restored – the Ashton Canal in the late 1990s and the Rochdale Canal in the early 2000s. Today, they form a connected network of heritage, community and ecological corridors, framing the Medlock Valley to the north and south.



vibrant
inspiring
future-facing

→ Impact

In the city centre, Mayfield Park has recently uncovered the River Medlock – meandering through the park and attracting wildlife. These renewed landscapes also hold significant ecological value – the Rochdale Canal is designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest for its rare aquatic plant, *Luronium natans*, while the Ashton Canal is recognised as a Site of Biological Importance for its rich diversity of aquatic life.

The Medlock may have been central to Manchester's industrial past, but today it's a living landscape of creativity and storytelling – from nostalgic tales of the past to innovative digital interpretation. This isn't just 'heritage tourism' – it's vibrant, inspiring, future-facing initiatives that invite communities to share and see their own stories of the valley. It's about creating a sense of ownership and pride that sustains long-term stewardship.

Potential investment projects



The Medlock Echoes: Art & Interpretation

Moving beyond traditional signage, this project uses the valley's unique infrastructure – viaducts, hidden bridges, and stone walls – as a backdrop for storytelling. Heritage-inspired art installations and interactive trails invite people to 'walk through time', connecting the area's industrial heritage with today's creativity and building a deep sense of pride and stewardship in our shared local history.

The Sapphire Path

Honouring Manchester's textile past, this project creates a continuous 10-mile blanket of bluebells – a historical nod to the textile dyes of the past becomes a record-breaking floral display. This ambitious project is also a massive community planting effort, creating a purple-hued spectacle and important habitat for pollinators.

Medlock Blue-Green Connector

The Medlock Blue-Green Connector offers a unique opportunity to invest in a 17.5km strategic 'wild artery', linking Manchester's urban core to the broader Medlock Valley. By revitalising the Ashton and Rochdale Canals, this project will deliver a nature recovery network that integrates Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) protection with climate-resilient 'Sponge City' infrastructure. Investment will use nature to solve problems, such as including floating ecosystems and sustainable urban drainage, to mitigate flood risks and enhance water quality, all while providing a traffic-free, walking, wheeling and cycling corridor for local residents.

Community

A valley shaped by its people

The communities on either side of the Medlock corridor are among the most deprived in the country, which makes this vision a matter of social justice. These communities live next to a significant natural asset that has, in the past, felt neglected and 'not for them'. But community action is changing that. Today, there's a sculpture trail, new ponds and a community allotment. The Medlock Valley Restoration Project is explicitly designed to connect local people with the valley, supporting unemployed people and those with poor health and wellbeing.

→ Impact

The community impact is twofold – broadening access and encouraging ownership. Through training River Guardians as citizen scientists who monitor the river, we have created a skilled volunteer base with genuine ownership over the river's future. We are also linking with and expanding Northern Roots-funded heritage champions, young producers, citizen rangers and researchers. With training and support, they will become a valley-wide network of skilled heritage storytellers, nature experts and future research alongside our river guardians.

Early engagement with children and young people – through outdoor education and creative storytelling – builds a lifelong connection to nature. As architects of its future, getting young people involved and invested in the Medlock Valley brings a powerful new dimension to its regeneration.

And getting the community involved with unused green spaces and local food growing turns neglected land into productive, loved landscapes. Critically, it's not just consultation, it's active co-creation.



Potential investment projects



outdoor learning

Women in the Wild

A bespoke skills programme specifically designed to tackle economic inactivity among women – a peer empowerment, outdoor learning environment that unlocks untapped talent and creates a direct pipeline to Manchester's growing green economy

The Guardian Network and Community Champions

Scaling the successful River Guardians model into a valley-wide workforce of skilled environmental stewards, trained in habitat maintenance, invasive species management, water quality monitoring and river restoration techniques through a high-impact practical green skills academy. Using mobile technology and local knowledge, these Guardians become the 'eyes, ears, and hands' of the Medlock – monitoring conditions, reporting issues, and actively restoring the riverbank. This creates a hyper-local, expert volunteer base that ensures the valley's health is sustained by the people who know it best.

Young roots in the Medlock Valley

By engaging young people directly within their local landscape, detached youth teams are transforming the Medlock Valley into a place of leadership, social action, and green career development. Dedicated coaching and hands-on environmental stewardship – from habitat restoration to citizen science – gives participants the chance to gain agency and provides them with the green skills needed for our future climate resilience. This integrated approach provides purposeful, paid pathways into environmental roles, ensuring that nature recovery and youth opportunity succeed side-by-side.

Active Travel

A valley that connects

The start of a walking, wheeling and cycling corridor already exists – but it's fragmented, inconsistent and not yet connected to the wider network. There's an opportunity to run a route to the heart of east Manchester – Clayton Vale, Philips Park, Holt Town, to the city centre. It would provide a continuous, traffic-free, green corridor to the city centre, serving some of Greater Manchester's most deprived communities.

→ Impact

Along the Medlock Valley, active travel can balance the needs of people and nature. High-quality wayfinding, adequate lighting, and accessible routes for people with disabilities and families with young children would make the valley genuinely inclusive. There are also connections to rail, bus and Metrolink stations, as well as bike schemes and cycleways for those on two wheels. Walking and cycling tours showcase the area and events, such as the Greater Manchester Walking Festival, create a year-round programme of activities. And it's not just about getting around, it's a key part of helping people to live well across Greater Manchester.



Potential investment projects



Championing and connecting active travel routes

Green in 15

Green in 15 aims to reduce health inequalities for one million nearby residents in Manchester, Oldham and Tameside by championing and connecting active travel routes. A ten-mile nature-rich active travel route from Mayfield Park to Bishop Park Monument on Saddleworth Moor will provide safe, accessible, and enjoyable green spaces for recreation and education; connect communities with nature to improve health, wellbeing, and social inclusion; address physical barriers and enhance access to scenic hiking trails; and improve the resilience of natural and urban environments to climate change.

Practically, the project involves a host of interventions, such as resurfacing paths; drainage work; laying hedges; replacing interpretation boards; removing trees from the canal; repairing stiles and fences; installing gates, bridges and handrails; and adding signposts. Everything to create a route that people can access, use and enjoy.

The creation of a new bridge at Medlock Gorge by Northern Roots has been given planning permission, but just needs funding to bring it to life.



Health

Nature for healthier futures

The Medlock Valley runs through some of the most health-deprived communities in England. Beswick, Clayton, Openshaw and parts of Oldham and Tameside consistently rank in the bottom 5% nationally for health outcomes. Yet all are within walking distance of this green corridor. Access to quality green space saves the NHS approximately £2.1bn per year nationally – let's be part of that story.

→ Impact

The health impacts operate across many different scales – from individual mental health improvements to population-wide reductions in obesity, cardiovascular disease and loneliness. Green social prescribing partnerships with health providers create formal referral pathways, turning the valley into an extension of the NHS. The ambition when it comes to health is bold – reducing inequalities by making sure that communities living nearby experience improved mental and physical health, gain life skills and even new employment. But these benefits rely on spaces being attractive, comfortable, safe and genuinely accessible – investment in quality infrastructure is an investment in health.



Potential investment projects



tackling isolation & loneliness

Walking for Wellbeing

This project transforms the riverside into a linear sanctuary through a series of wellbeing walks – low-impact, high-reward green exercise that can reduce anxiety, blood pressure, and social isolation. Created by a team of volunteers, these walks also include 'pause points' that encourage neighbours to meet, rest and move together tackling isolation and loneliness.

Live Well Wild Hubs

A network of outdoor 'wellbeing stations' throughout the valley with nature-based activities – from heritage-based art and nature therapy to woodland management for mindful focus. By grounding clinical health referrals in the valley's unique industrial landscape, we turn treatment into community-led adventure.

Growing health across the valley

The Natural Health Service is moving beyond Northern Roots to reach every corner of the Medlock Valley. Nature is a powerful tool for healing, which is why we work alongside doctors and recovery services to support people through their toughest health challenges. It's not guesswork, we are part of a world-leading study proving the link between nature and mental health. More support means more lives changed through the simple act of connecting with our valley.

Nature Restoration And Climate Resilience

Building climate resilience through nature

As we face increasing climate pressures, the Medlock Valley's green and blue spaces represent some of the most significant opportunities to tackle climate challenges through nature – slowing floodwater, cooling urban heat, locking up carbon, and reversing biodiversity loss.

→ Impact

River restoration increases resilience to both flood and drought, while catchment-wide Natural Flood Management (NFM) mapping identifies opportunities to protect communities at highest risk. The valley's industrial legacy – with features such as historic landfill sites and sewer drainage – needs careful restoration to improve natural ecological processes and to enhance water quality and water management. The overall aim of leaving wildlife and habitats in a better state than before means any activity creates real conservation wins. Climate resilience means the valley doesn't just survive climate change – it helps Greater Manchester adapt to it.



Potential investment projects



Blue-Green Arteries

Here, we will unlock the river by removing industrial-era barriers – improving ecological connectivity, restoring natural processes and connections to floodplains. **Key opportunities include:**

- Deculverting at Netherlees and removing or modifying large weirs at Holden Clough and Park Bridge, Medlock Vale and Nether Lees to reconnect fish migratory routes.
- The flagship Philips Park Restoration project to transform hard-engineered banks into diverse habitats, remodelling land for wildlife and nature with community engagement.
- A wide-ranging assessment to find the best opportunities to bring nature back – and leave the area in a better state than we found it.

The Carbon Sponge

We are redefining the Medlock's peatlands as vital climate infrastructure. By actively restoring them, we will bring our upland mosses back to life – turning the valley into a place that soaks up carbon from the atmosphere and creates a rich habitat for wildlife.

- The Great Moss Recovery implements the Peat Soils Action Plan across the equivalent of almost 800 football pitches of deep and shallow peat at Ashton Moss and Little Moss – converting a carbon source into a massive carbon sink.
- At Oldham Lees Brook and Strinesdale Reservoir, Wetland Wonders will create a mosaic of wet woodlands, providing vital 'soaks' that slow the flow and support rare species like the willow tit and grass snake.

The Urban Canopy and Grassland Mosaic

We will build a robust 'Green Shield' through reforestation and grassland management.

- The Medlock Tree Action Plan regenerates existing woodlands and plants new forests at sites including Lilly Hill and Lower Slack Farm, physically stitching the valley into the Northern Forest to combat urban heat island effects.
- The 'Cut & Collect' grassland revolution transitions historical mowing regimes to more seasonal management of meadows. This creates a nectar-rich 'Pollinator Highway' that connects fragmented urban habitats into one continuous resilient ecosystem.

Economy and regeneration

Shared prosperity through green growth

The Medlock Valley sits within one of Greater Manchester's most significant development opportunity zones. It runs through Manchester – connecting the Etihad Campus, through Ancoats, to Mayfield and beyond to Castlefield. Green infrastructure can increase property values, reduce NHS costs, create green jobs, boost tourism and attract more public and private investment.

→ Impact

The valley could be a catalyst for green skills development, helping people back into employment by training them for the green economy jobs of the future. Event spaces throughout the valley attract local communities and visitors alike, and there's opportunity to create local jobs through cafés, bike hire, heritage tourism and outdoor activity businesses. Critically, green skills training prioritises those who are unemployed or from deprived communities, meaning that any regeneration uplifts the people who live right here, alongside the valley.



Potential investment projects



The Medlock Academy & Ranger Service

Establishing a flagship Conservation Ranger Service that doubles as an accredited training hub, targeting communities facing economic exclusion. Training pathways include:

- **Climate-Ready Landscapes:** Using smart design to keep our streets cool in summer and protect homes from flooding.
- **Nature Recovery Experts:** Training local people to track and protect wildlife, helping the UK meet its new nature-protection laws.
- **Green & Blue skills:** Training a workforce to plant our future woods and care for our rivers.

The Transpennine Route Upgrade Green Gateway

Working alongside the Transpennine Route Upgrade to transform the railway corridor into a rich, connected natural habitat. Travel hubs can use Transpennine Route Upgrade investment to create seamless, 'nature-first' walking, wheeling and cycling links between the railway and the valley. Large-scale woodland planting flanking the upgraded tracks will create a 'Linear Forest' to provide acoustic buffering, biodiversity corridors and a spectacular 'Green Welcome' for everyone travelling into Manchester by rail.

We're already having an impact

The Medlock Valley Restoration Project

Between 2023 and 2025, the Medlock Valley Restoration Project demonstrated exactly what strategic, collaborative investment can achieve at scale. Supported by £1.1 million from Defra's Species Survival Fund and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the partnership brought together Groundwork Greater Manchester, The Conservation Volunteers (TCV), City of Trees, Mersey Rivers Trust, and the Canal & River Trust, working alongside Manchester, Oldham, and Tameside Councils.

Seven management plans now provide the baseline for long-term stewardship, ensuring that this is not a one-off intervention but the beginning of sustained recovery.



21 months. £1.1 million. Transformational impact.

Habitat – conservation and restoration:

- 33.3ha habitat restored
- 6,000 trees planted
- 3.3ha new wetland created
- 5.7ha grassland improved
- 4km landscape improved
- 2.9km new or restored footpaths
- 1.4km riverbank protection

People – connecting people with nature:

- 3,937 people engaged including:
- 1,717 young people
- 468 members of ethnic minority communities
- 513 unemployed people
- 188 people living with long-term health conditions or disabilities
- 275 activities

Jobs and skills – providing employment and training:

- 329 people trained in green skills
- 12 jobs created or retained
- 57 active volunteers
- 7,115 volunteer hours (£142,000 value)
- 13,500 engagement hours – including people attending led walks, talks, and nature festivals

If £1.1 million can deliver this much in 21 months, just imagine what £10 million could deliver across the entire valley...

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Aligning with regional policies

The Medlock Valley is aligned with regional and national policies – including GMCA Local Nature Recovery Strategy, GMCA Live Well, GMCA Five-Year Environment Plan, Manchester City Council Biodiversity Strategy, GMCA Places for Everyone and Historic England’s Wellbeing and Heritage strategy – and embedded with local policies, such as infrastructure and biodiversity plans. In fact, it’s essential to delivering it. Investment here helps Greater Manchester meet the commitments it has already made.



Let's make this happen



If you'd like to find out more about our work in the Medlock Valley and how you can help to make our vision a reality, please go to:

groundwork.org.uk/medlock-valley/

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